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Cheer Up! It's Penultimate Week! (How Fortuitious)

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Teaching and Learning Center

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Cheer Up! It's Penultimate Week! (How Fortuitous)

I love words, and have loved them since before I was able to read and write. I am sure that is why I became an English major in college, and why I have a job that lets me live in the world of words every day. (Although I also had a deep love for birds since my young days, leading me to regret that I did not study them in an academic setting—Dr. Bird, ornithologist! That would be even better than Larry Sprinkle, weatherman.)

I especially love words that most people misuse. My students know that I will correct them when they refer to the stand in front of class as a “podium”—a stage object on which one stands. (That object I am reading a book from is a “lectern.”) I cringe and resist the urge to correct when people say a guy has a goatee—when what he clearly has is a van dyke. (Maynard G. Krebs had a goatee; Paul Stookey had a van dyke.) I inwardly, secretly laugh when someone says something like, “Since it is raining, it

certainly is fortuitous that I brought my umbrella today!” (It is indeed fortunate that you brought it, but you actually just said that you brought it only by chance. “Fortuitous” is related to “fortune” only in the sense of chance, not in the sense of luck.) I cannot count the number of otherwise well-educated people I have heard misuse the word “fulsome.” It does not mean “a great deal” or “to a great extent.” If they ever looked the word up, they would find to their horror that the compliment they were trying to pay was actually a grave insult. Oops!

I say all this not to fit into the stereotype of the English professor (“You teach English? Oh no, I’ll have to watch what I say around you!”), but to introduce one of my favorite words: penultimate. I love it partly because it has such a nice sound, but also because it is rarely used, and (this is the kicker) on the rare times it is used, it is

almost invariably used incorrectly. I have heard people hold up, say, a pen, and exclaim, “I love this pen! This is the penultimate pen!” The second to the last pen? Because that is what penultimate means: second to last.

So, next week in my classes, we will celebrate Penultimate Day, the second to the last day of class, partly so I can share with my students one of my favorite words, but mainly because the second to the last day, like the second child or the second choice, deserves its due and is often overlooked. I teach on Mondays and Wednesdays this semester, so Penultimate Day will be Wednesday. (Like Easter, Penultimate Day is a moveable feast.) If you see me walking down the hall next Wednesday in a Hawaiian shirt, overalls, and tie-dyed Converse All-Stars, do not be overly alarmed: that is just traditional Penultimate Day garb. (“Traditional” only in the

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Continued from page 1

sense that I made all this up, and that about a decade's-worth of students have had this experience.)

And this week is Penultimate Week for the semester, the second to the last full week. (This is also the Penultimate *Weekly Reader*.) (I believe I have used that word quite enough.)

A college campus operates on its own peculiar calendar, and thus has a peculiar rhythm. Next week gets all the glory and all the anxiety as the last week of the semester, but this next to last week deserves its own attention. Both Penultimate Day and Penultimate Week are good times to slow down, catch our collective breath, exhale some tension, and gird ourselves for the beginning of another ending. The students will soon be stressed to the max, but so will the faculty and staff. So let this week be a short respite before the coming storm.

I got an email out of the blue yesterday afternoon from a student from long ago, from my teaching at another school. She graduated twenty years ago from Converse College, in 1993, and in a way, so did I: 1993 is

when I left my job at Converse and came to Winthrop. Jane Manning (not her first and last name, her good Southern double name) said she was on campus to meet with Dean Rakestraw, and she wanted to come by and see me. A couple of hours later, as I was hunched over Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (I have figured out a way to get paid to read books I love!), I heard a mischievous voice from the hall ask, "Where did all that grey hair come from?" The same Jane Manning I knew back then, with the same impish sense of humor. Two decades melted away in an instant. Jane Manning now lives in San Francisco, working for a company that sells educational software and technology. She wrote in her email that I had been very influential in her life. I remembered her well, with great affection, but truth be told, I have probably thought of her only a few times in those intervening years. As it is with teachers and students, the student remembers more, and more often. Jane Manning introduced me to her colleague, then demanded of me, "Tell her about the Thai tie!" After all these years, the thing she remembers is one of my stupidest and most elaborate jokes. (I will

spare you, faithful readers—you have suffered enough.)

As Cosmo Kramer might say, "It's another Penultimate Week miracle!" That short and unexpected meeting with a student from long ago (I refrained from pointing out to her the bit of grey in her own hair) made my day, made my week. It also reminded me of the value of humor in the midst of seriousness and stress—Jane Manning was an excellent student, and I am not at all surprised that she has done so well, but she also had an infectious sense of humor and a special attitude about life. No wonder she and I made such a connection long ago. We can do the very serious business of learning and teaching even better with the leaven of humor, with a bit of lightening up, especially in times of stress and anxiety. If some of my current students remember nothing else about me or my classes than the goofiness of Penultimate Day, I will not be displeased. That would indeed be "fortuitous." (I take that all back! I fervently hope they remember the lectern and the van dyke—as well as the value of critical reading, the importance of specific examples in writing, and on and on.)

XXITE 2.0 ----- The Virtual Gathering Place for WU (The Reboot!)

Jo Koster and I invite you to join XXITE (Twenty-first Century Teaching Excellence)—or if you have already joined, to check it out again as it grows and develops. Maybe you have not been there in a long time—if not, you will see many changes in look and content. For example, XXITE now has groups dedicated to HMXP and CRTW, with

those of us who teach those courses sharing ideas and materials. Talk to Jo about setting up your own interest group. Jo is particularly interested in recruiting a few people to blog regularly about their teaching.

Jo set up this interactive site to give Winthrop faculty a virtual gathering space to share ideas about teaching and

technology. You'll find blogs and discussion forums on various topics—and we urge you to add your own ideas. Visit again at <http://wuxxite.ning.com/> Or email Jo Koster for an invitation to join: kosterj@winthrop.edu The TLC website also has links to navigate your way there or to join: <http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/>



A New Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The Teaching and Learning Center is offering a new service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me at (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Join XXITE 2.0 or
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Session

At

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and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a one-year subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: <http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop> See you there!

Thought for The Week

"One of the most striking differences between a cat and a lie is that a cat has only nine lives."
--Mark Twain